

Violence, Veils and Bloodlines

Reporting from War Zones

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
<i>Preface</i>	1
ONE : Faces, Faiths, Tongues and Blood	7
TWO : Across the River and Into an Iraqi War	21
THREE : Jerusalem's Soured Milk and Honey	50
FOUR : Lebanon's Cedars of Mayhem	78
FIVE : Gender War Unveiled in Afghanistan	101
SIX : The Bumpy Tribal Road from Moscow to Tel Aviv	118
SEVEN : Riding the Rails and Crossing Borders	141
EIGHT : Crosses to Bear in Belfast	167
NINE : Somalia, Land of the Walking Dead	189
TEN : Desert Anarchy, Algerian Style	207
ELEVEN : Bosnian Test: Who's Your God?	227
TWELVE : Soul-Searching in Central Asia	258
THIRTEEN : In Syria, My Name Is Not My Name	281
<i>Index</i>	307

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“For everything I relate, I have seen; and although
I may have been deceived in what I saw, I shall
certainly not deceive you in the telling of it.”

*From a letter to Henri Marie Beyle, the
French author known as Stendhal*

Preface

The question was simple: Would I prefer to be a political reporter in Washington or move to Jerusalem as the Middle East correspondent for Atlanta-based Cox newspapers? The answer was simple, too. It was like asking whether I wanted to continue to stare into a mirror at home or, as things turned out, see the world from both sides of a rolling picture window.

After decades of keeping *The Miami (Florida) News* alive, Cox decided in late 1988 to let the ink run dry. My job as the paper's editorial page editor, always rewarding and almost always satisfying, was ending.

To Jerusalem I would go for four years, followed by five in London. From those hubs, I reported from the mysterious and fractious Middle East, throughout Europe and parts of Central Asia into North and East Africa and later from Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Timing and experiences, old and new, combined to unveil tribal behavior so universal that it seems for sure like an identity stamp impressed on bodies and souls.

As a reporter and editor, I always felt like a naked outsider. That role suited my personality, but in darker moods seemed to wrap me in the robe of a professional voyeur. Reporting from Belfast to Kabul, my role didn't change, although the full meaning of what I observed was transformed. My family background, I learned over time, enriched and enlightened my understanding of the behavior that I saw through my reporter's lens from tribe to tribe on three continents.

After three months in Washington, where I observed Middle Eastern tribal leaders, American political chiefs and journalists tickle each other and the world with smiles, false promises and even lies, my wife, Pat, and I left for the lands of Abraham.

Before our personal possessions had reached Jerusalem, where tribal behavior is as visible as temples, mosques, churches and police reports, I was

off to Iran to report on the death of the Ayatollah Khomeini. Within weeks Lebanon was my destination, followed by a lengthy journey to Moscow, Leningrad and Ukraine, where I wrote about Jews fleeing the dying Soviet Union.

So it went across the world where I reported for more than nine years. My senses were bombarded with bloody divisions that swelled from families, clans and tribes to broader ethnic, religious, language, cultural and territorial faults, leaving survivors wondering why and how former friends and neighbors could become deadly enemies. On the flip side of all these divisions are, of course, unions just as numerous.

In some regions, abuse and oppression reached to the largest and most basic tribal fissure of all — gender.

The more borders I crossed, the better I understood tribalism's universal nature, the behavior that I viewed outside the rolling picture window. On the other side of the window, my own background came into clearer focus and sharpened my understanding of tribalism in the world's behavioral chain.

At first I was unaware that my own background could help me understand what I was reporting. But when similar patterns of behavior rose in bold relief from tribe to tribe, I realized that my own family experiences were an aid, not a hindrance, to comprehending what I was seeing and hearing.

But not until a young Macedonian-born Albanian man asked, "Mr. Lou, what's your blood?" did I realize what people want to know when they ask a visitor, "Where you from?" They don't want to know where you were born, where you live, or the color and script on your passport. They want to know your grandfather's — always your father's father's — origin, your tribe and ethnicity, religion, ancestral language and territorial roots, all the characteristics that, they think, will identify you as friend or foe.

Laced with voices, faces and events that are usually vaguely known and even less understood, the tribal stories are rich with detail that flows from desperation:

- An aging couple huddles with a grandchild amid sandbags in a hut a scant yard or two from their tiny flower and vegetable gardens.
- An elderly woman waits for death while lying in a rain-drenched dugout at a refugee camp.
- A child stricken with diarrhea vomits at the feet of his rigid and famine-stricken mother who bears no milk to save her son.
- Families frozen in terror at the mere thought of missiles laden with poison gas pulverizing their homes and suffocating its occupants.
- Children with guns in hand and others with bullets in their bodies; a man who, dressed in unmatched dignity, talks of surviving years of solitary confinement and nearly three decades of imprisonment

because he fought for freedom in a tribal clash that pitted the weak against the more powerful; a lone survivor tells of his extended family being slaughtered in a religious, political and territorial conflict; in the name of God and religion, the more powerful kill the weak and rejoice because, they are convinced, that truth, beauty and righteousness are theirs exclusively.

Travel, on its own terms, removes a person from himself and opens a path for information and understanding to journey from eye to mind and back again. Add a journalist's life and work and the paths multiply, widen and lengthen.

Without the luck of the assignments, I would not have traveled from Belfast to Kabul to witness the innate and universal power of roots, religion, tribalism and blood. At the same time, the family and culture brought to the United States by my grandparents, sifted down to me and then leavened by my own education and life, added richness and credibility to the tribal realities that I witnessed, and to the narrative.

Readers, I feel certain, will scramble to confirm or deny their own tribal behavior. They will also be surprised, perhaps shocked, at how often they see and hear tribal behavior in their midst.



Some of the names in this book have been changed to protect people who live in dangerous places. In Chapter 13, however, only my family name has been changed.

Faces, Faiths, Tongues and Blood

The first question was always the same: “Where you from?” Sometimes I answered “Lapland,” casting a mental wink toward my seventh-grade geography teacher then laughing to myself at the absurdity of my tribal joke.

At other times I would say Sweden or Norway as I recalled reporting on the Ayatollah Khomeini’s funeral in Iran with two tall, fair-skinned Norwegian journalists. They were mistaken for Americans while I was taken as some sort of Iranian tribal cousin.

To stretch the inquisition and force more pointed questions, I would sometimes say that I hailed from Millville, Massachusetts; Woonsocket, Rhode Island; New England or Miami. Even when I introduced myself as an American correspondent with Cox Newspapers in Atlanta, my interrogators weren’t satisfied: “Where you from?” they repeated, emphasizing the word from and raising their voices when my answers fell short of their expectations.

In Aberdeen and Belfast and all across the Eurasian expanse to Afghanistan and Pakistan; in North and East Africa, the Middle East and Persian Gulf region, tribal chiefs, political figures, religious worthies and unworthies, killers, hostage-takers, desperate refugees, hotel clerks, cooks, taxi drivers, translators, life-saving aid workers, soldiers, police, arms dealers and women weeping for dead children asked, “Where you FROM?”

The question says more about the questioner than the questioned. Few asked where I called home or even where I was born, unless they thought I was born in their world or in the lairs of their ancient tribal enemies. They really wanted to know my roots, my religion, my tribe, whether I spoke their language, and by extension whether I liked their culture and supported their status in the world. My answers would determine whether they would trust me with their truths.

People of the deserts, steppes and littorals, of the mountains, valleys and islands were eager to fill a slot in their cultural lock boxes with a simple answer

that would tell them all they needed to know about me. By my answer they would judge me, probably for all time or at least until they learned more about me as an individual. Most often we didn't get to know each other well enough as individuals because I trudged from war to war, crisis to crisis, during my nine-plus years as a foreign correspondent.

For almost half that time I was based in Jerusalem, a city that suffocates under the religion and religiosity of three major faiths. When I wasn't in the city that Christians, Jews and Muslims bless more for themselves separately than for each other, I ranged across landscapes that were no less tribal.

Mere days after I arrived in Jerusalem I learned that "Where you from?" means, "What's your tribe?" "What's your religion?" as if Islam, Judaism and Christianity were the only religions in the world. Wherever it is asked, the question cuts two ways: It binds and it divides. Which of the two prevails depends on where you sit and the answer to the question.

Everywhere I went the question came up because I have Mediterranean features and don't look like the tall, blond Hollywood version of an American. My waning Massachusetts accent altered by twangs from other languages and dialects acquired in my travels added to the mystery. Often I was accused of not even sounding like an American, so eager were people to put me in a slot they could more easily judge and understand. My Slavic, Semitic, Latin and Nordic friends refused to be tricked and thrown off course by the simple answer that I was an American. They knew better. They could tell by looking at me that it wasn't that simple. They wanted to identify a friend, or an enemy, a person they could or couldn't trust.

But I seldom answered the question they wanted answered unless they asked me pointedly. I was not eager to help them put me in one of their identity boxes that locked out individuality and sealed in generalizations. Because of an inadequate vocabulary or because they wanted to be subtle and inoffensive in their search for generalizations, my inquisitors usually couldn't figure out how to frame the question to get the answer they sought. So they simply repeated it, each time shouting "Where you from?" a little louder and shouting the word "from" loudest of all. They behaved something like an American speaking loudly to a foreigner who knows little English in the belief that turning up the volume will force understanding from the ear to the brain.

Most of the time, I began my part of the dialogue by saying simply that I was from America. When that didn't satisfy the questioner, who was searching for something much deeper, I strung out my American connections this way: I was born in Woonsocket, Rhode Island, grew up in Millville, Massachusetts, went to college in Massachusetts, which is in New England, a small region in the northeastern United States. This tactic usually produced more frustration than enlightenment or even sharper questions.

In Europe, mainly on the continent, when I introduced myself as Lou Salomé, a knowing smile often was my reward. Many an inquisitor asked, "Do you know who Lou Salomé was?" Nietzsche's lover, I answered, following their line of thought. This was always an entertaining twist to the usual line of inquiry. Louise von Salomé, an attractive Russian-born woman of German descent, was Friedrich Nietzsche's real or would-be lover as well as an object of desire for many other men of her time. That Lou Salome, no tribal cousin for sure, was also a friend and colleague of Sigmund Freud and a psychologist and psychotherapist in her own right. But Nietzsche, not I, remains her tether to history.

The names of my father and grandfather were an occasional point of interest among those trying to nail down my origins.

A female security officer at the airport in Tel Aviv, where the questioning of departing passengers was routine, once asked about my father's name in an attempt to expose the heritage that she probably suspected would match my appearance. My father's name was Abraham, Ibrahim among Arabs, a name that works wonders among Jews and Arabs. But Abraham was of no defining help to her.

"What's your grandfather's name?" the security officer asked, reaching back a generation. "Which one?" I answered. That was my trick answer. "Wait a minute," she responded, leaving to discuss this heavy security matter with her boss. "You can go," she said upon her return, without uttering another word. Her boss probably figured that I couldn't possibly be a problem if I didn't know which grandfather counted for both. His conclusion was right, but for the wrong reason. My answer was a cultural curveball, because in the Middle East only one grandfather counts; the paternal grandfather holds all the sperm. Your mother's father is strictly second rate in that part of the world.

On a few occasions, such as at the airport in Djibouti, the former French colony on the Horn of Africa, inquisitors quickly narrowed the question to, "Where's your grandfather from?" I was in a hurry and the airport workers were holding my passport, so I omitted the grandfather distinctions and answered quickly. "Syria," I said, my tone dripping with, "And what are you going to do about it?"

The sharpest tribal question that I received came from Diamant, a translator and guide whom I had hired in Skopje, Macedonia. Born in Macedonia, Diamant was in his early 20s. But he was an ethnic Albanian, and in his mind, body and soul he would always be an Albanian, not a Macedonian, although I thought he most certainly would never live in neighboring Albania, Europe's poorest country. Albania was so deprived it was the only country where I ever saw a pig on a leash, although many peoples elsewhere had no pigs.

My translator spoke the Slavic tongue of Macedonia, and he spoke Albanian, too. He said he was a Muslim, but not to his marrow, not the kind who would fit comfortably in Iran or Saudi Arabia. We were traveling from Macedonia to Albania on a reporting trip. It was August 19, 1995, and we were crossing the border where autos were required to drive through a depression in the road that was filled with dirty water and mud. The object was to cleanse the underside of vehicles, an impossible chore as I saw it, so mirrors at the end of long poles could detect any bomb. Before crossing the border, passengers were required to wash their boots in a pan filled with dirty water, as if one of the countries were cleaner or less tainted than the other, which seemed an absurdity of a high order.

Cleared to go, we pulled away from the local version of a car wash and entered Albania. My translator quickly turned inquisitor. “Mr. Lou,” he said, “Where you from?” He knew that I was an American because we had discussed this before. Now, in his mind, he was searching for soul not surface. He wanted to learn what was beneath my skin because he believed that if he knew that, he would know where I stood on tribal issues that were important to him and therefore what he should think of me.

My answers at first were the usual ones: America, New England, etc. Impatient, he cut me short.

“Mr. Lou,” he said, “What’s your blood?”

I raised my eyebrows, smiled and mumbled holy shit under my breath. Give this kid an “A,” I thought. No one had ever put the question exactly that way to me before and no one has since, but this was the real and proper translation of “Where you from?” For most of the world, the tribe is where life begins and often ends. Tribe means the corps a person can count on to help in times of difficulty. Forget about individuality, education or the effects of where you have lived and with whom. Heritage, religion, language, race, ethnicity, soul, history—blood, if you will—are what matter. I stopped playing around because I thought his question deserved a direct answer, although I knew my answer would probably deceive him even if he thought it did not.

What little light there was near the border of Macedonia and Albania flicked on around me: This was the real question people wanted to ask when they said, “Where you from?” I knew what they wanted generally, but the specifics escaped me until my ethnic-Albanian friend from Macedonia asked me the question that people the world over want to know about everyone they meet. What’s your blood?

After I explained that my grandparents had gone to the United States from Syria almost a hundred years earlier and settled in Rhode Island, this young man of Albanian descent who lived in Macedonia didn’t ask another

question. Syria, roots, was what he was after. I don't know exactly what that meant to him, and maybe it was a cipher that he wouldn't admit, but he seemed to have his answer to all the personal questions he could ever think to ask about me. this is to judge placement only.



All the principal traits that people apply to identify themselves and separate themselves from others I call tribalism. This elastic circle of union and separation literally begins with family, clan and tribe. These basic alliances naturally include language, religion and sects within religions, culture and all that implies, ethnicity, race, gender, region and territory, wealth, power and national interests. Those are all tribal traits. They are all — especially religion, tribal blood ties and flags representing saints, sinners and nations — the eggs of war, to paraphrase the French writer Guy de Maupassant.

Wherever war and mayhem thrive, tribalism — now often couched under the rubric of national interest — rules. That's what you see when you strain the alphabet soup of wars from Algeria to Bosnia to Iran and Iraq, to Lebanon, and Somalia, Israel and Palestine, Tadjikistan, Afghanistan, Rwanda and Northern Ireland. Tribes usually resist shedding their views of history. In that way, tribes can use their same views over and over to rekindle the flames of tribal hatred. Outsiders, with their own interests to feed, are always willing to pour more fuel on the pyre.

Tribal unity prevails almost uniformly in the smaller circles of families and clans but surely not always in the larger orbits. When you share pastry and tea with a poor Lebanese family in the middle of a war and the father asks, "Do you like our food?" he is really asking, "Do you like our culture? Do you like us, our tribe, better than you like our tribal enemy?"

Some alliances that seem to defy logic are made along larger tribal fault lines. Trying to divine which alliances will crumble and which new ones will deepen and strengthen and why is a lifetime job, especially in the Middle East. The word Byzantine, used to describe an indiscernible labyrinth of political and social behavior, wasn't coined in Lapland.

Westerners, especially Americans, prefer to think in a more linear and naive fashion: For example, all Shiite Muslims think and act alike whether they live in Iran, Iraq or Azerbaijan; all Kurds will always stick together against a common foe; Arabs always will oppose non-Arabs, such as Iranians. But life and the competing interests of religions, ethnic groups, nations and rulers are too complicated for such simplicity.

At the same time, two old saws generally, but not always, hold true among people in the Middle East as they often do among tribes elsewhere: Many alliances are formed and broken according to the rule, the cliché, that,

“The enemy of my enemy is my friend.” When conditions change, so do enemies and friends.

The second rule, which is tribal to the core and often quoted, goes something like this: Me against my brother, me and my brother against our cousin and then the circle widens slowly until it becomes, under great stress, all regional tribes against any foreigner. In other words, loyalty stretches throughout the extended family and tribes to include ethnic, religious, language and most other tribal ties almost without end until the line is drawn at foreign tribes. When foreign tribes enter the fray, they will not receive permanent visas.

American officials have been fond of saying that foreign fighters have infiltrated Iraq to boost the insurgency there. Whatever truth there is in that line of thinking, the language is essentially propaganda aimed at deceiving the American public. In Iraq’s sectarian, regional and ethnic tribal conflict, American, British and other Western troops were considered the foreign fighters.

To these two maxims I would add a third: “Every man for himself.” This explains why expected tribal alliances do not always hold, but it doesn’t destroy the dominant, “What’s your blood?” principle that governs tribal loyalties and actions.

These maxims don’t fit snugly and may seem contradictory, yet they are real and can coexist simultaneously. That’s the reason comprehending tribal politics is so difficult. If you’re looking for one overarching tribal theme in the Middle East, it would be this: The tribal circle with all of its real and potential contradictions extends to region. Right or wrong, foreigners in large numbers or as occupiers will never be welcome there in the long run. At the same time, individual visitors are accorded great, perhaps unmatched, hospitality throughout the region. Hospitality is, in fact, a tribal obligation. It is a cultural sin of great magnitude if a person or family fails to provide food, drink and comfort no matter how meager their resources. But don’t plan on staying too long.

Referring to Israel’s presence, an intelligent Palestinian, not a religious extremist by any means, once said to me that although it took almost 100 years, the Arabs and others in the region threw the Crusaders out of Jerusalem. He wasn’t affected by a *khamseen*, which in Arabic means 50, and which is one of those brutally hot and sultry desert days when the temperature reaches 50 degrees Centigrade or about 127 degrees Fahrenheit. That was his history, his tribe, talking and revealing another characteristic of the region: No one forgets any slight. This view of Arab/Muslim dominance and persistence also displays another regional characteristic: a selective view of history. The Arabs prefer to forget the centuries-long Ottoman Turk domination of the region

that ended after World War I, and the region's earlier history when Jewish kingdoms competed with those of other tribes for regional power. Of the Turks, the Arabs would say, at least they were Muslims; as for the old Jewish kingdoms, well, that was very long ago.

On more than one occasion young Palestinian Muslim men became visibly saddened and their faces pale when they asked if I was a Muslim and I said, "no, my family is Christian." Their color returned a little when I brought the conversation back around and said that my grandparents had gone to the United States from Syria almost a hundred years earlier. Their reaction laid bare the scale of competing tribal traits and interests in the region.

Lebanon, unfortunately for all Lebanese, is a classic example of unifying and competing tribal interests. Differing Sunni and Shiite Muslims, Maronite Christians who like to consider themselves French or even Phoenician, Palestinian refugees and Druze, who are Arabs but not Muslims or Christians, all battled over historic slights and for power during the civil wars of the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s. The blood prizes were religious, economic, political. When Syria, with its historic ties to Lebanon, Israel, Iran, the United States and France all plunged into the quagmire in attempts to further their own interests, Lebanon burned ever more deeply.

The Syrian-Iranian alliance demonstrates how the usual tribal rules can be broken when other, stronger tribal interests prevail. In broad tribal terms, an Iran-Syria alliance is more of a mismatch than a match. Syria is an Arab country and a majority of its people are Sunni Muslims, Islam's largest and most powerful sect. For a few years in the latter half of the twentieth century, Syria and Egypt, which is predominantly Sunni and the most populous Arab country, built a political union. But Syria's secular government has for decades been controlled by the Assad family which belongs to the Alawite sect, a minority branch of Islam's Shiite sect.

Iran, however, has a fundamentalist Shiite Islamic government. Iranians are an Indo-European, not a Semitic, people. Shiites are Islam's largest minority, but a minority nonetheless. To say that establishment Sunnis and Shiites do not normally mix well is to say that Irish republican Catholics and Protestant British unionists in Northern Ireland don't love each other.

Syria and Iran are brought closer on a sectarian level because the Assad family's small Alawite sect is closer religiously to Iran's Shiite population than to the majority Sunnis in Syria. At the same time, the Assad political network is more balanced than Iran's and includes members of the Sunni majority as well as members of Christian sects.

On a political level, the Iran-Syria alliance is a smoother blend because their two governments have shared common enemies — Iraq and Israel — and interests. Iran fought a long war against Saddam Hussein's Iraq, while Syria

and Iraq have long been divided along Arab political/ideological lines. Iran gave military and economic help to its deprived Shiite brothers of South Lebanon, where women still follow the tribal codes and walk three steps behind men. A major reason for Iran's support was to counter the Israelis: Syria supported that same cause and aided Iran's efforts to build the Hezbollah fundamentalist Shiite movement in South Lebanon.

Syria, of course, was directly and indirectly engaged in fighting the Israelis in Lebanon after Israel's 1982 invasion. Later still, when Israeli troops remained in South Lebanon backing their Lebanese Christian proxies, Syria indirectly fought Israel through the Lebanese Shiites that Iran also supported. So, Lebanon remained a periodic punching bag in Middle East power politics.

On nationalistic paper, Syria and Iraq should have been allies, leaving the Indo-European Iranians as the odd-tribe out. Like the Assad family in Syria, the late Saddam Hussein led a secular, not an Islamic fundamentalist, government. But deep political, personal and sectarian differences blocked a Syrian-Iraqi alliance. Other Arab strongmen, Sunnis by sect, considered Saddam Hussein a threat to their power. But for various reasons, those dictators could not at first completely sever the tribal bond to a fellow Sunni Arab. Besides, the other Arab dictators considered a secular Arab leader as less of a threat than Iran's Shiite fundamentalists, at least until Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in 1990.

Saddam Hussein and his family of Sunni cohorts controlled Iraq and subjugated its majority Shiite population and large Kurdish minority almost exclusively through his extended family from its narrow tribal base in the village of Tikrit. Here again one family and one tribe ruled.

For weird tribal alliances it is tough to top Iran's pals in the 1970s and 1980s. Under the shah, Iran and Israel were allies during the Cold War in part because Iraq was the enemy of both. But after the Ayatollah Khomeini and his band of Shiite fundamentalist mullahs deposed the shah, Iran saw Israel as its bitter enemy and Syria, an enemy of Israel and Iraq, as its friend. So Syria and Israel, enemies of each other, have both been allies of Iran, but at different times and under different circumstances.

The most reliable absolute in the tangled tribal allegiances and divisions of the Middle East and South Asia is that there is none. If all of this appears convoluted and almost unfathomable, one reason is because the tribes and the reasons for their conflicts and shifting alliances are unfamiliar to most Americans.

Afghanistan's clans and tribes, save for the Afghan Communists, fought the Soviet Union throughout the 1980s. Even in that hard war against a common enemy, the Afghan tribes did not fight under a common command. They fought separately, divided literally among tribes that split along ethnic and

language lines, and Islamic leanings. When the defeated Soviets withdrew, stung by U.S. military aid to the Afghan tribes through Pakistan's intelligence agencies, the Afghan tribes turned against each other in a destructive civil war that produced the wildly extremist Taliban, the Students of Islam. The Taliban warred against women and children as well as against their military and political rivals on just about all tribal terms.

Although Israel is comprised of Jewish tribes and subtribes from throughout the world, in the Middle East Israel is a tribe unto itself. When Israel tries to play the regional game of the enemy of my enemy is my friend, it makes short-term gains that may buy time and confuse its enemies, but is usually less successful in the longer term. Israel has been successful when it deals directly with its enemies, such as Egypt and Jordan, with whom it has peace treaties thanks to American money and military assistance. The Israelis, when they plunge into the Byzantine game, play what is usually called their minority card, sometimes called their Muslim card. When Israel plays that card, it tries to split non-Arab Muslims from its Arab Muslim enemies.

Israel's attempt, with the Reagan administration's backing, to set up a friendly Christian regime in Lebanon in the 1980s was a disaster that took Israel more than 20 years to undo and which still simmers for the Arabs. That the Christian phalange militias were as brutal as those of any other Lebanese tribe wasn't the only point. The Israelis were looking for a counterweight to hostile tribes in Lebanon, including the Palestinian refugees there. They backed the wrong tribe in Lebanon and probably always will because they can't win by backing proxies on that turf if all the other tribes allied against them. When the time came for the Maronite Christians, who like to accent their Francophile ties and their long-faded Lebanese Phoenician genealogy, to tie the knot with Israel, their leaders couldn't do it. They could not separate themselves from their Lebanese tribal cousins, although Israel and the Lebanese Christians shared common enemies in Lebanon.

Although the Ayatollah Khomeini is long buried, the mullahs who succeeded him in Iran retain a vitriolic hatred of Israel. This is partly because Israel, along with the United States, backed the shah, whose secret police imprisoned and killed thousands of Iranians, among whom were Shiite fundamentalists.

When the shah dumped the Iraqi Kurds in the mid-1970s, with the complicity of the United States, Israel had been backing the Kurds and the shah because the Israelis and the shah shared a common enemy: Saddam Hussein. That didn't work well either. Ask the shah. Ask the Kurds. Ask Israel. Ask Henry Kissinger. With Saddam Hussein gone from the scene and Iraq riven by tribal rivalries and still a potential quagmire, Khomeini and his descendants sat on their religious throne in Tehran for more than thirty years.

Israel's latest Muslim ace in the hole is Turkey, also a U.S. ally and a member of NATO. Turkey, as the Ottoman Empire, ruled the Middle East for centuries. A large country, Turkey sits atop the rest of the Middle East like a lid on a large pot and controls much of the region's water supply. Most Turks are Sunni Muslims, but with a strong strain of Sufi Islamic traditions and practices, a curious mixture of warrior brotherhoods, poets, mystics, love and tolerance. Its government is secular and real control rests in the hands of generals. Sometimes shaky, the Turkish-Israeli alliance seems to be holding.

Western tribal alliances and conflicts can be just as complex, but usually they don't seem so because the players are more familiar, the policies are our own and we trust our propaganda and nuanced language more. We may even think we know enough to take sides in familiar fights. Some conflicts appear more linear than others, but a closer look shows their complexities.

Everyone knows that the Protestant and Catholic tribes, may their gods bless them all, have fought for centuries in Northern Ireland. It's not all of the Catholics and it's not all of the Protestants although sometimes it appeared that way. Their cooling conflict is more than a tribal fight about religion. It is thoroughly cultural, linguistic, ethnic, political and territorial, imperial, and centers as much on history — Britain's long and brutal rule over Ireland — as it does on the fact that most of the Irish are Catholics and most of the British unionists in Northern Ireland are Protestants.

Coleridge's warning about religious fanaticism applies to members of all sects, not only to Christians. "He who begins by loving Christianity better than Truth will proceed by loving his own sect or church better than Christianity, and end by loving himself better than all," the poet said. To the great extent that his admonition has been ignored throughout the world, religious tribalism has given birth to wholesale death and unyielding hatred.

Tribal conflicts — whether singly or in combination, about language, religion, race, gender, ethnicity, power and land, national interest or any other aspect of tribal chauvinism — are driven by fundamentalist extremism, which need not be sectarian but in which religion usually plays a part. Sometimes the extremism gestates on the fringes before it bursts to the dominant center. At other times extremist tribal themes are generated by governments or the powerful center. In the Balkans and Iran, for example, it was the power of the historic center stirred by dominant figures that dictated public behavior. Individuals and minority views are silenced or drowned out by the sweep of broad passion. Anyone in strong disagreement gets killed, flees or joins in to survive.

Americans remember fundamentalist Iran for its masses gathered in the countless tens of thousands to shout "Death to America" while the believers beat themselves in a frenzy of rage and religion. What I remember is talking

sanelly with many Iranians in the midst of funeral proceedings for the Ayatollah Khomeini. They asked about America and U.S. government policy, but they were not threatening. Yet when the crowd grew into the thousands and the “Death to America” chants began, the sanity disappeared. The people who had been talking rationally joined with the crowd to wail and shout and beat their breasts. They had no choice, with the religious police, the army and the crowd watching. The crowd had taken over from the individual and the human dynamic was instantly transformed. This could happen anywhere, I thought, if government power and popular emotions are allowed to run amok.

Many tribal forces, not just one or two, may determine alliances and betrayals and result in a contradictory picture that often is difficult for outsiders to see clearly. So it’s a mistake to believe that all Shiite Muslims, those in Iran and Iraq, for example, share the same views about the role of religion in the state, or that all Orthodox Christians automatically will unite on all tribal issues. Some tribal beliefs are stronger than others, and some threats are more personal to one tribe than to others.

Russia publicly supported Serbia in the Balkans wars. Both are historically Christian Orthodox countries, but Russia’s Orthodoxy was newly rediscovered after the fall of communism and a weakened Russia was not about to fight to defend Serbia when NATO bombs rained on Belgrade. A few years earlier and the Russians, the Soviets, might have behaved far differently. And so, too, the United States and Western Europe.

Minority tribes in the Middle East and East and North Africa, and to a lesser extent Eastern Europe, deal with their status in different ways, depending on their size. If they are small, like the Circassians in Syria and Jordan, Christian Copts in Egypt or ancient but obscure religious sects such as the Yazidis in Iraq, they try to stay under the radar of the ruling tribe. For them, almost any glare brings the boot. They adapt, compromise and try to avoid calling attention to themselves, although even those actions don’t always save their blood. Their objective is to survive, to shield themselves from persecution by governments and dominant tribes that periodically must instill fear and flex their power to stay on top. Members of these minority tribes occasionally deny their heritage to strangers to avoid being seen as troublemakers. At the same time, large minority tribes and even tribes that are a numerical majority but lack political, military and economic power often rebel and threaten the ruling tribe.

The Kurds in Iraq, Turkey and Iran are examples of large minority tribes that frequently rise up, try to act like their oppressors by engaging in shifting alliances in their struggle for freedom before they get outmaneuvered and overpowered by the controlling tribe. Majority Shiite Muslims in Lebanon,

poor and forever suppressed by once-dominant Christians and minority Sunni Muslims, made their strike for gold during the long Lebanese wars of the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s. The Party of God — Hezbollah — eventually succeeded, with the intentional help of Iran and Syria, and the unintentional aid of Israel and the United States.

In many countries, minority tribes are referred to by the word ethnic followed by a hyphen, as the ethnic-Albanians in Macedonia and Kosovo, the ethnic-Syrians of southeastern Turkey and the ethnic-Tadjik and ethnic-Uzbek tribes of Afghanistan. In countries like those, nothing melts in the pot because there is no real pot. The hyphen has real meaning. It is used to distinguish members of a minority tribe who live in one country but, in the opinion of other tribes, don't really belong there. They are singled out for a hyphen because the majority tribe believes the hyphenated minorities belong in a neighboring country that usually bears their name, such as Tadjikistan for Afghanistan's ethnic-Tadjiks and Uzbekistan for Afghanistan's ethnic-Uzbeks. Hyphenated tribes, if they are large enough, usually spend all their waking hours fighting for their rights, sometimes politically, sometimes with arms. If they are too small to fight back, they go quietly into the mix without ever blending in.



In all my years of working abroad I never heard anyone, except foreign government officials, refer to the United States as the United States. America is the name people from most other tribes use, although I was careful with officious British customs officials to say that I was from the United States. If I told a customs official at London's Heathrow Airport that I was an American, he might respond, as some have, "North or South America? There's more than one country in America, you know." That's how people behave when their empire disappears.

Outsiders, by and large, know much more about America and Americans than Americans know about Arabs, Russians, Poles, Bosnians, or even about Israel and Israelis. I sat in classrooms in Normandy, France, where middle-school students studied D-Day and the American-led invasion of Europe during World War II with the interest of American students trying to master computer science. The French boys and girls could trace in great detail the march of American GIs through their land. The records of a Dutch Catholic priest remain the best source anywhere of information on American GIs who were killed or unaccounted for fighting in Western Europe during World War II.

When I first visited my own family members in Syria I found that they knew the names and relationships of all their principal relatives in the United

States, most of whom are dead. But my knowledge of those relatives in Syria, some of whom are first cousins, was almost zero. One man, a second cousin who lives in the family village, recalled how, after his family had heard of my father's death, he postponed his wedding in 1964 and later had only a church ceremony with no reception.

The people I met while working and traveling generally have a good bead on America. That view can be skewed some, but not entirely, because it is shaped heavily by the exercise of American power in their country or region,

From the outside, America is a magnet because of its military power, wealth, size, opportunity to study and make money, and for its freedom. Of those, I believe, political freedom is the least understood because most other tribes know little about it. The freedom to work, study, own a business, make money and perhaps become rich is well understood because that prospect exists elsewhere, although the opportunities are fewer. Because of its size, wealth and freedom, America offers greater opportunities for success.

But the full meaning of political freedom is more difficult for many outside tribes to grasp. In countries where ruling tribes suppress other tribes for many reasons, a person learns to have political conversations under a tree in a park. True stories of husbands and wives squealing on each other in Communist East Germany, Romania and throughout the old Soviet Eastern bloc offer a hint of the difficulty that people from suppressed societies have in understanding freedom of speech and other democratic exercises. Go to America, work hard, make money, keep quiet, maybe return to the native country before the kids become teenagers in order to avoid drugs, street crime and sex in the cities. This view of America still prevails in other tribal lands.

The outsiders' view of America is more pink than rosy as it once was. But few foreigners would turn down the opportunity to move to New York, Chicago or San Francisco. There is a real fear of crime and drugs and sexual permissiveness, and the harm those aspects of American culture can do to families. Drug abuse, to be sure, exists at various levels throughout the world. But to the rest of world, crack-cocaine America is the global drug capital. Sexual repression is almost as much of a problem in the Arab Middle East as is the wholesale commercialization of sex in the United States, although Middle Easterners would never admit that.

In the dim light of a Cairo club, I watched with great amusement as two young Saudi princes, apparently making their debut on the town and on the barley, consumed several bottles of whisky during hours of galloping delirium while continuously throwing fists full of money at fully clothed dancers who did nothing but toss their long hair around and swivel their heads. The

young Saudis won the money-tossing competition with two Libyan businessmen who cried oil when they ran out of cash. By the time the featured belly-dancer reached the stage, the Saudis were dead drunk and vomiting on their zippers as they stumbled to the men's room. Hanging on the shoulders of their minders, the princes left for their limo before the best belly-dancer I ever saw anywhere heaved and shook her way on stage.

Criticism of the American people is rare among tribes in the Middle East and Africa, more common among tribes in Europe. But in the Middle East, I found no shortage of criticism leveled against U.S. government policy. At the core of this criticism, the Arab tribes will tell you, is the failure of the U.S. government to follow fair and balanced policies in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

Members of Afghanistan's various tribes know few details of the running Israeli-Palestinian conflict. But when they watch the BBC and/or Middle East networks showing Palestinians being attacked by Israeli forces, the picture they see shows America and Israel on the same team and Muslims on the other side. If they know about the Palestinian suicide bombers, either they don't let on or they consider it a fair response to the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories. But that's only the most obvious point of criticism by outside tribes. Beyond Israel and Palestine, America and the West are targeted for their exploitation of the region, specifically, for trying to control its oil resources. The acquisitive, imperialistic nature of Western culture is also widely suspect. This contrasts sharply with today's tribal cultures that by nature are more closed and protective of their heritage and traditional way of life.

Some Middle Eastern and North African countries want to modernize, and have to some degree, but on their own terms. They want to acquire the tools of technology to modernize, but without having to surrender their customs and religious norms to an alien culture. At their roots, those tribes know that to modernize wholesale on Western terms would be to sacrifice their cultures. No matter what others think of their traditions, this is not a trade they wish to make. More open societies would benefit more people in those lands, but even those who are suppressed by ruling elites believe, as many have told me often, that change must come by their own hands.

Even in some Western societies, a person's tribe contains a person's essential identity. In America people say that "Blood is thicker than water." Or "You have to take care of your own." Or "Keep it inside the family," and "Don't wash your dirty linen in public." If you pay close attention, you will be surprised at how often you hear the words "blood" and "tribe" and "family" mentioned in a tribal context.

Class lines are fading in Britain, but still a person's accent gives away his region, education level, social and economic status. When I lived in London

from 1993 to 1998, the tabloids there still published headlines about frogs and krauts if they believed they could stir up the blokes sufficiently to sell a few more papers. Ask an East Londoner what he thinks of Yorkshiremen and he's likely to laugh and say, "They all have short arms and deep pockets." Put Scots, Welsh, English and Irish in a pub after hours and duck. But let another country threaten Britain, and the old Angles, Saxons, Normans, Picts, Scots and Welsh become one.

Class, wealth and education, as well as race, gender, religion, refugee status, language and region are tribal zones in the West. Westerners, especially Americans, like to believe that all citizens of their countries are equal, but anyone who sits in court or seeks health care but can't get insurance knows better.

Even globalization is a tribal matter. Globalization, which is nothing more than triumphant post-Cold War capitalism on steroids, is one of the most important tribal dividers on the map today although it is obscured by meaningless nation-state power acronyms and silly jargon. Globalization is the wealthy countries taking advantage of the poorer peoples masked by the cliché that a rising tide raises all boats. Problem is the money goes into yachts for the few, not even rafts for the many.

Money tends to be the great leveler in the United States, as well as the great divider. Race, ethnic background, gender, education and career remain great tribal fault lines in America.

These days the West's main tribal motivator is economic, the acquisition of wealth at the expense of others on the grounds that everyone has the same opportunity, which is not so. What the United States and the West can't get by bullying, they try to buy. They can buy political leaders, as the Bush administration did in Iraq, but in the long run it is impossible to buy the street. Globalization is a marketing word coined to paint exploitation as opportunity. Poor people yearn for a better life, but not for foreign exploitation that destroys native cultures and shifts the bulk of a country's natural wealth to foreign tribes.

I've heard Western aid workers in Afghanistan condemn the use of the word primitive as judgmental because it suggests that materially advanced nations belong on a higher plane of human values than countries where camels and donkeys draw water from wells by walking in circles. Tribal contrasts are highlighted, not blurred, when materially advanced countries seek to suck up the wealth and resources of poorer countries, no matter what label they give to the latest shell game in which wealthy tribes again conquer poorer tribes under the guise of spreading democracy and civilization, as if civilization belongs to one tribe, one kind of culture, only.

Two years into the 21st century, not long after I had returned to the United States from London, I met a young Haitian man who was carting groceries to customers' cars in Palm Beach Gardens, Fla. We talked in English at first. As we walked to my car, I spoke a little French, knowing that a smile awaited me because language sunders barriers, opens doors: "What's your name? How are you? How old are you?" I said to him in French. The man was surprised to hear someone who was not a member of his tribe speak a language that is closely related to his native Creole.

"Where you from?" the man inquired. "Here, the United States," I answered, thinking the question strange because most of the time I speak decent American English.

"No, No," the man answered. "Where are you FROM?"